

Senate Uses Helms Apology To Probe Activities Of CIA

COPYRIGHT

By JOSEPH R. L. STERN
(Washington Bureau of The Sun)

Washington, July 29—The Senate Foreign Relations Committee today capitalized on a mistake by Richard M. Helms, new chief of the Central Intelligence Agency, to take a closer look at CIA operations.

Committee members questioned him about rumors of CIA interference in labor union elections and about reports it had used educational institutions, foundations and the international student exchange program as a "cover." Helms replied that under its charter the intelligence agency can operate only outside the United States.

Apology Made

The CIA director—in office only a month—went to Capitol Hill at his own request to apologize for sending a letter to the St. Louis *Globe-Democrat* lauding an editorial harshly critical of the committee chairman, Senator Fulbright (D., Ark.), and his effort to gain a role in overseeing the CIA.

Helms told the Fulbright committee that an assistant had prepared the letter, attached the editorial to it and placed it in a batch of personal mail that he signed routinely.

According to Fulbright, who said Helms's "forthright" answer closed the letter-writing issue, the CIA director acknowledged he had not focused sufficient attention on the comments he sent the *Globe-Democrat*.

Different Approach

Looking somewhat chastened, Helms emerged from his two-hour closed session with the committee and reluctantly faced reporters.

"I regret having signed the letter. I apologize for it. I made a mistake," he said. The slim, dark-haired, 53-year-old CIA chief then walked away, refusing to answer questions.

It was learned, however, that when he was before the committee, Helms answered every question put to him by senators.

This was a different approach

from that of his predecessor, William F. Raborn, who angered the Foreign Relations Committee by saying he could not respond to questions about the agency's sources and methods.

Only the special CIA watchdog panel composed of members of the Armed Services and Appropriations committees could get such information, Raborn held.

Raborn's stand so infuriated Senator Fulbright and Senator McCarthy (D., Minn.) that they sought approval of a resolution giving the Foreign Relations Committee an equal vote in surveillance of CIA activities.

Events Related

It was the defeat of the Fulbright-McCarthy effort, by coincidence, that provoked the editorial that inspired the letter that brought Helms in a defensive position before the Fulbright panel this morning.

Opinions about the significance of his testimony varied.

Senator McGee (D., Wyo.) said Helms's mistake had turned out to be "helpful and constructive" because it educated some committee members about the real nature of CIA operations.

Henceforward, McGee suggested, some of his colleagues might be less "suspicious" about the CIA and less prone to make "a lot of wild statements" about the agency.

McCarthy, in contrast, said he thought Helms's testimony "opened up new avenues for discussion and a possible compromise" in his effort to obtain a Foreign Relations Committee role in watchdogging the CIA.

Testimony "Salutary"

Fulbright, who aired his suspicions about CIA interference in domestic affairs on the Senate floor yesterday, thought the Helms testimony was "salutary" for different reasons.

Out of the precedents set by

Helms's responses, Fulbright indicated, the Foreign Relations Committee might be able to get the kind of information about sources and methods that Raborn had denied it.

Fulbright said Helms had assured the committee "very positively" that the CIA had not used the student exchange program as a cover for espionage activities. The committee chairman added, when asked, that he had no hard evidence to the contrary.

No Union Involvement

Fulbright also reported Helms as saying that so far as he knew CIA agents were not intervening in labor union elections. Explaining why he had raised that prospect yesterday in the Senate, Fulbright remarked: "I had heard they do."

Before Helms arrived at the Capitol this morning to give his personal apology and explanation, Senator Morse (D., Ore.) issued a statement calling upon him to resign.

Morse was unable to attend the committee meeting because of his efforts to settle the airline strike. But none of his colleagues who heard the CIA director testify backed up the resignation demand.

Fulbright and McCarthy professed to be satisfied with Helms's apology for writing the letter to the editor.

All Would Resign

Senator Mansfield (D., Mont.), the majority leader, remarked that if every man who made a mistake had to resign, the entire Senate would have to resign.

Morse, in demanding that Helms quit, said his letter "disqualified him for further useful service in his present capacity."

"We must assume," said Morse, that the controversial letter was but part of a CIA campaign to influence public opinion through planted press stories and articles.